

LEARNING CAN BE FUN

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The Animal School: A Parable

Once upon a time the animals decided to do something decisive to meet the increasing complexity of their society. They held a meeting and finally decided to organise a school.

The curriculum consisted of running, climbing, swimming and flying. Since these were the basic behaviours of most animals, they decided that all the students should take all the subjects.

The duck was excellent at swimming, better in fact, than his teacher. He also did well in flying. But he was very poor in running and he was made to stay after school to practice. He had to drop swimming in order to get more time in which to practice running. This continued till his webbed feet were so badly damaged that he became only average at swimming. But average was an acceptable grade in the school, so nobody worried about that except the duck. The rabbit started at the top of her class in running, but finally had a nervous breakdown because of so much time spent in practicing swimming. The squirrel was excellent at climbing until he developed a psychological block in flying class, when the teacher insisted he start from the ground instead of from the tops of trees. He was forced to practice flying until he became muscle-bound and received a 'C' in climbing and a 'D' in running.

The eagle was the school's worst discipline problem; in climbing class, she beat all of the others to the top of the tree but she insisted on using her own method to get there. The gophers, of course, stayed out of school and fought the tax levied for education because digging was not included in the curriculum. They apprenticed their children to the badger and later joined the groundhogs, and eventually started a private school offering alternative education.

The above parable calls for serious reflection on the notion of learning. It is taken for granted that every child should learn mathematics, science, history, art, music and language. It is time we realised that an average child is not interested in all of these subjects. We have yet to come across a child who is not happy to get a 'free period'.. When-children are coaxed, goaded and forced into learning they turn out to be indifferent scholars who scrape through school and college and become dull office workers, uncreative teachers, mediocre engineers, and unimaginative factory managers.

'Play is serious business.' - Eric Fromm

We have always felt a little uncomfortable with phrases like 'joyous learning', 'maths can be fun', 'fun with physics', 'sci-fun', 'play way method' and so on. They seem to suggest that the ultimate aim is 'learning' and, that, learning is something tedious and unpleasant but essential for life and

therefore needs to be sugar-coated with play. In such thinking, play, fun and joy are used as mere means.

Our society seeks study and play as exclusive categories. Study is usually regarded as serious business, boring but unavoidable, while play is something of our choice, something we enjoy. Unfortunately, in an increasingly consumerist society even the nature of our play and leisure is determined by commercial interests.

We have been making simple toys out of throwaway material which are popular with both children and adults. However, there has been one difference in the response of the adults and the children. While the children have blissfully played with the toys, dismantled them and tried to rebuild them, the adults have always added a rider after appreciating the toys. 'What is the scientific principle behind this toy!' or 'How can it complement the textbook' Children should be allowed to enjoy themselves. 'We must not spoil their fun by giving pedantic scientific explanations. This is likely to kill the interest in the activity. If and when the curiosity in the child is awakened, he/ she will find out for herself.

In our society 'learning' is overemphasised. Unless a child is learning something it is considered that she is wasting her time. We have heard parents say, 'Our son can play the whole day, but ask him to study and he begins to feel sleepy and tired.' Similarly, a child who can rattle off all the film songs and ad jingles with gusto cannot remember the multiplication table for 13. This calls for a serious reconsideration of how learning takes place in our society.

'Do not let schools interfere with your education.' - Mark Twain

There is a mistaken notion that learning takes place only within a structured school framework. Unschooled people like tribals have more knowledge about plant life, herbs, trees, animal behaviour and so on than the botanist or zoologist. Illiterate village folk have immense knowledge about growing crops, domesticating animals, weaving and house building. Children in such societies acquire the skills and knowledge for survival by observing and participating in these activities. Values and modes of behaviour are learnt from the family and the community. Thus, living in society is itself learning.

Education today is heavily tilted towards acquiring more and more information. Most of this information has hardly anything to do with the child's lived reality. What relevance does ~the location of Pacific Ocean have for a child of ten! If a child has genuine interest in anything she will pursue it on her own. A self-motivated child does not need marks, grades and awards to propel her. She works not to please others, but because she feels her work has intrinsic worth. Unfortunately, the present scenario is hardly conducive for such an endeavour. Children's self- motivation is squashed and they are made to fit the school system. The system of rewards creates an artificial~ interest in the activity. Children motivated by rewards lose interest in the activity soon after getting the reward.

Education for the hands, the heart and the head has become an overused cliché, often confined to the annual reports of the schools. We have been overemphasising the training of the head alone. One of the frequent questions I have asked my students is about their favourite subject and why they like it. The most common answer is, 'I like the subject because I get good marks in it.'

Today's students know a lot. One has to just look at the quiz competitions. But they understand little and feel much less. They have mastered the art of debating, declaiming and reciting on a variety of issues ranging from communalism, gender justice, nuclear disarmament and ozone depletion. But once they are off stage they stop caring about the issue they just debated. I was shocked the first time I encountered this reaction. On reflection I realised that we have taught our children to know but not how to feel. They can talk animatedly about equality and justice and yet practise discrimination in their own lives! Meaningful learning is possible only when the emotions and the intellect are integrated.

Learning is a process--sometimes tedious, sometimes exciting, sometimes frustrating and sometimes fulfilling. But today we are in a mad rush to reach the top, to succeed, to leave others behind. Schools, as a microcosm of society, are also caught in the competition. They compete with each other for more medals, more trophies and more recognition. The casualty of such competition is children's learning. It is a well known fact that most holiday homework is done by the parents and the art, craft and written work done by the teachers. This happens because the exhibition or the competition gains precedence over children's learning. We tend to focus only on the end product ignoring the process. What is crucial is a perfectly crafted sculpture, a painting with the right colour scheme and perfect proportion, flawless embroidery, a balanced well written essay, perfect working models and projects. However, the process of doing--writing an essay or painting a portrait--is more important. The frustration of not getting it the way you want, the ability to overcome an obstacle, the joy of discovery, and the confidence of being in control...we rob our children of all these experiences by doing their work for them. We forget that making a mistake is a natural part of learning. We get irritated, scold and humiliate the child, thus giving her a permanent distaste for learning.

What is understood as learning is confined to the four walls of a classroom. The teacher teaches and the student learns; the teacher transfers information and the student passively receives it.

I worked with tribal children in Madhya Pradesh (now Chattisgarh), in a single teacher school where a large hut was partitioned with gunny bags into five classes. It was naturally chaotic and noisy. The teacher resorted to the stick to maintain discipline. It was impossible to do much inside the classroom so I decided to take my class- standard V students outside. Once outside, the students were completely transformed. They were like free birds, chattering, singing, jumping and dancing. They led me to a pond, showed me different types of insects and weeds. They rattled off different characteristics of each insect, how and why they breed, their changing habitat and what the village folks do with them. I was amazed at how much they knew. The children were excellent at catching fish and made a fishing contraption out of nothing. Some children showed me how to weave a basket out of the reeds nearby. They knew exactly when the *sal* and *palash* bloom, what part of a plant is edible, what part of a tree is used for stomach upsets; they recognised different bird and animal calls and that a profusion of a particular insect meant that rain is around the corner. I became painfully aware of my own ignorance.

However, the next day we were confined to the classroom due to rains. So I began with a lesson in geography. To my dismay, the bright active students who knew so much about the contours of their local geography, the flora and fauna around, were totally at a loss with the textbook. They could make no sense of what was written in the textbook (which was in Hindi while the children spoke

Chattisgarhi). These children are bound to fail a school exam. But then does it mean they are uneducated!

Their learning is integrated learning, meaningful and rooted in their reality. As against this, learning in schools is compartmentalised and fragmented, first as different subjects--science, mathematics, geography, Hindi, English, art, music--then as grammar, composition and spellings. But then is a child learning only mathematics in the mathematics class? He may be drawing a caricature of the teacher, or trying to pass on a message to a friend without being noticed by the teacher, or make a friendship band; he is learning to survive a boring mathematics class.

Language and communication are something that children learn by talking to one another. But schools consider this an act of indiscipline. Instead we have a special grammar class to learn language! One educationist remarked, 'It is nice that children spend just a few hours at school. If they spend all 24 hours in school, they will turn out to be dumb!' In most schools, teachers talk, children listen. The same is true for other skills also. Children learn a great deal without being taught, by tinkering and pottering on their own.

Today, we live in a world of specialisation, which leads to fragmentation. Schools hardly help us meet our daily basic needs. We need to depend on specialists for simple things like taking care of our health, repairing a leaking tap, or growing vegetables. We have been reduced to mere consumers, contracting and subcontracting our lives to 'specialists'. We are told that we don't even know how to inhale and exhale air from our nostrils and a 'specialist' must teach us how to do it the right way. A society where the 'art of living' is big business, must, at core, be a dead society! Parents are increasingly being less responsible towards their children. They seem to be placing more faith in an alien institution named 'school' rather than their own 'gut feeling'. Working parents have to face several problems. High pressure at the work place and socialising leaves them with very little time to spend with their children. At the same time there is heightened awareness about the 'overall development' of children. So, irrespective of children's interests, they enrol them for various extra-curricular activities--from swimming, to tennis, to music and dance classes, not to forget a 'foreign' language. Doing one boring task after another, children become automatons and act like robots. They forget to smile and laugh. They have no time to reflect or think for themselves. All children need is their parents' time and someone to talk to.

We talk a lot about creativity but one of the most important components of creativity-originality-is missing. And so we have mass-produced 'creative work'. To create an ethnic ambience we have the ubiquitous *Warli* painting. A look at the display boards in junior schools is testimony to this. Paper lanterns of the same size and shape made by the teachers and probably coloured by the students, or Christmas trees or bunny rabbits proudly displayed. Where is the child in this maze of creativity? Are we being creative when we hire props instead of letting the children make them for the annual day celebration! Are we encouraging creativity in children when we write essays and speeches for them! When a painting made by a teacher is palmed off to a visitor as a student's creation, what message are we sending to our children?

When we talk about creativity we think mainly in terms of art, craft, music, dance and language. We do not associate creativity with subjects like physics or mathematics. One can be creative in every aspect of life. For being creative we need to work with our own hands, use our own imagination. We have to stop being mere users/ consumers and become doers/producers.

Today, the so-called enlightened schools have learned to mouth politically correct phrases like 'child centred education', 'progressive education', 'free learning' and so on. This can be quite misleading. It creates an illusion of free learning where one is made to believe that there is no force and coercion used given the freedom of choice. But what happens in reality is that children are and that children are persistently manipulated, persuaded and guided to fall in line. Phrases like 'Aren't you a good boy! Then do that sum quickly,' or 'What a wonderful class this is, so disciplined and courteous,' are used instead of 'You unruly bunch of hooligans! Keep quiet or I will take you to the Principal.' Eric Fromm calls this psychic manipulation and makes a plea for an escape from this kind of fake freedom.

All children have a 'gleam in their eye' before they go to school. But soon this gargantuan combination of education and bureaucracy fails them. Schools replicate the power structures of the larger society of which they are a part. Uniform, assembly, protocol, attendance, homework, tests, exams define a school. But all these rituals have very little to do with real learning. Obedience, discipline, pin-drop silence and regimentation seem to be the rule in most schools. We do not need enormous centralised schools in order to have quality education. This is the reverse of what we have been told and sold. All over the country we have destroyed small schools in which it might at least have been possible for teachers to do some of the things, which Gijubhai Badheka did. In their place we have built giant school-factories, which we run, for the most part, like armies and prisons because they seem too big to be run like anything else. The idea behind this was that in small schools we could not afford to have the kinds of equipment, material and specialised teachers that we thought we needed to get enough variety and depth in the children's learning.

Changes in the school system--if they are to be of lasting significance--must spring from the actions of teachers in their classrooms, teachers who are able to help children live creatively. New programmes, new materials, and even basic changes in organisational structure will not necessarily bring about healthy growth. A dynamic and vital atmosphere can develop when teachers are given the freedom and support to innovate. One must depend ultimately upon the initiative and resourcefulness of such teachers and this cannot be promoted by prescribing continuously and in detail what is to be done.

In education we cry too much about money. Sure, we could use more; but some of the best classrooms and schools I have seen or heard of, spend far less per pupil than the average in our schools today. We often don't spend well what money we have. We waste large sums on fancy buildings, unproductive administrative staff, on diagnostic and remedial specialists, on expensive equipment that is either not needed, or under used, or badly misused, on tons of identical and dull textbooks, readers and workbooks, and now on gee-whiz devices like computers. For much less than what we do spend, we could make our classrooms into far better learning environments than most of them are today.

Divaswapna (Daydreaming) by Gijubhai Badheka, is an Indian classic on education. Bereft of educational jargon, it is an inspiring tale of a school teacher who, despite severe odds, tries to make learning fun. It tells what one teacher was able to do when given a chance and a little help.

Even in the 1920's, Gijubhai was able to sense the futility of stupid textbook. Faced with a rowdy and unruly class, he decided to tell them a story. Immediately, there was pin-drop silence. All the children were glued to the story. The school bell rang, but the children insisted and begged, 'Sir, can

you make the story longer! We are willing to stay back after school.' This transformation came about not because of the cane of the teacher or the power he wielded, but because he was doing something innately interesting.

For the next ten days the children heard more and more stories. The children were now 'hooked'. On the eleventh day, the children demanded a new story. The teacher then honestly confessed, 'I tell, I have told you all the stories I knew. I don't know anymore. Isn't it silly, that we have a class of 50 children and all of us have the same books! So don't buy any textbooks. Instead, give me the money and I will buy three different story books for each of you. So, instead of 3 stupid textbooks you will have 150 interesting story books.'

So, with no support from the management (or for that matter, from the World Bank or the EU) this visionary teacher, eighty years ago, with the children's own resources started a classroom library. Much later in the 1970's, the radical pedagogue, Paulo Freire gave the slogan, 'Not the word, but the world.' But Gijubhai was practicing it so much earlier!

After hearing a story the children would enact it the next day. Soon the children became very proficient with words. They did not learn the dialogues, for they had become very resourceful in inventing their own dialogues on the spot!

Gijubhai had a penchant for converting all dull curriculum into games. For teaching verbs, for instance, he made many slips of paper with some action written on them. These slips of paper were folded and put in a basket. Each child had to pick up a slip, read it and then act it out. The other children had to decipher it. It was fun and participatory, and in no time the children learnt their verbs very well.

Gijubhai took the children out for field visits. The children collected various specimens of igneous and sedimentary rocks, bird feathers and nests, and samples of medicinal plants. Soon the children had collected a veritable museum of natural history in their school. And all this was done in the 1930s--before 'environmental education' became a catchword!

danger: School! by Paulo Freire is another landmark book. For years he taught unschooled adult peasants to read and write in remote and poor villages. His method was a politically radical, grown-up version of the method that Sylvia Ashton Warner described in her book *Teacher*. Sylvia, who taught Maori children in New Zealand for twenty-four years, realised the incongruity of teaching language by using English primers that had little respect for, or reference to the children's lives. Sylvia discovered that all children lived in the twilight world of 'sex' and 'fear' but no teacher wanted to touch these issues. She devised an ingenious method and, everyday she asked the children for an emotive word, a word which deeply concerned them and which they really wanted to learn. If they said, 'drink' (as many children had alcoholic fathers) then that word would be up on the blackboard and etched forever in the children's minds. In a period of six months the children prepared sixty illustrated primers. Now the written word made sense to them. The themes reflected their life's culture, concerns and problems.

Following a similar method, Freire began by talking with Brazilian peasants about the conditions and problems of their lives, and showed them how to read and write those words which were most

important to them. He found that it took only thirty hours before the wretchedly poor and demoralised peasants were able to explore reading on their own.

Thirty hours! One school week! That is the true size of the task. Of course, the Brazilian army did not like Freire making peasants literate and politically conscious and threw him out of the country. How many hours, weeks, months, years do our children spend in schools without even learning the basics!

Before children can understand a thing, they need experience: seeing, touching, hearing, tasting, smelling, choosing, arranging, putting things together, taking things apart and experimenting with real things. Learning by doing is connected to looking more critically at your own reality. It encourages creative thinking, self-expression, originality, the confidence to experiment, the courage to make mistakes, learn control and perfect skills.

Burettes, pipettes, test tubes and other fancy laboratory apparatus often threaten children. Principles of science are best understood if children can see them. For them the whole world is a laboratory. Life, for them is a series of experiments. They have an innate ability to see patterns in 'little' things around them. The Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP) showed the possibilities of doing more with less. Children could do exhilarating science with simple things. The ability to improvise experiments with almost zero-cost holds great promise in this resource-starved country. The message is loud and clear-- school children can do great science with little money and resources. Newspapers make great caps. Origami--paper folding--is a wonderful way to learn practical geometry. With two film-roll bottles and a piece of old cycle tube you can make a pump to inflate a balloon. You can even pop the balloon. Bottles, rubber slippers, crown caps, broomsticks, matchboxes ball pen refills are not 'junk' but 'resources' to make lovely action toys. We buy more than we need and generate enormous amounts of junk, burdening the earth. To heal the earth we need to reduce, recycle and reuse. Sustainability demands that we do more with less. Often, creativity blossoms in conditions of scarcity.

Totto chan is the single landmark bestseller on education ever. This book has sold over seven million copies in Japan alone! No book on education, from Montessori to Piaget, has captured the popular imagination to the extent that *Totto chan* has. The National Book Trust has published this in eleven Indian languages. Every single person, teacher or parent, child or adult, must read it. *Totto chan* is the story of an inquisitive girl and how she was thrown out of her previous school because she did not 'fit' into the standard mould. Fortunately, for little Totto chan, her mother was a very wise woman. She did not tell Totto chan about this incident and took her to another school where she was welcomed by Kobayashi, the principal. The new school was made of old railway carriages and had just fifty children. Classes were held in the old carriages, with one compartment acting as the library and another as the science laboratory. Kobayashi and his school welcomed children with physical disabilities. He organised races, hurdles and other games in which the physically challenged children won. The prizes in these competitions were carrots and green spinach!

When *Totto chan* was printed in Japan in the early 1980s, it rang a chord in millions of hearts. The book broke all publishing records. It juxtaposed mass-produced factory education against a sensitive personalised education, where the child was at the centre of things. The book proved that there are no problem children – only problem schools and problem societies.

End